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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000099

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: OUR PUSH AGAINST PRE-ELECTION PRESSURE DRAWS  
COUNTER-FIRE FROM PRESIDENT

Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: CDA protested to Presidency advisers February 5 about the pattern of campaign abuses we have detected. Most notably, these have included abuse of state administrative resources, coercion of public sector employees to campaign and recruit for PM Sargsian's candidacy, door-to-door campaigning with an intimidating air, and widely reported (but hard to document) vote-bribing. CDA was summoned to see the Foreign Minister February 6, so that a presidential staffer could convey a very aggressive counter-message that if the embassy makes any public statement, the president will view that as inappropriate interference with domestic affairs, and would retaliate very firmly. Since our conversations, the Prime Minister and the CEC chairman have each made statements against such abuses. We are taking a wait-and-see approach for the rest of this week, to decide if further action is appropriate. END SUMMARY

12. (C) TAKING IT TO THE CHIEF OF STAFF: CDA and Polchief called on Presidential chief of staff Armen Gevorkian and adviser Vigen Sargsian February 5 to raise concerns about credible, widespread reports of several categories of abuses. First, that regional and municipal governments were being heavily used as arms of the campaign, with governors and mayors serving as Sargsian's campaign managers for their regions/cities. Furthermore, the officials were using the administrative chains of command under their control to direct public sector employees (such as school and hospital staff and local government employees) to participate actively in the campaign: to vote for the PM, and to collect names and passport data for co-workers and friends, with explicit or implicit threats to their employment status if they failed to deliver. Second, we have heard reports of aggressive or intimidating door to door campaigning, again with widespread reports of passport data being collected, apparently to seal the deal. CDA floated the possibility that the embassy may soon make some kind of public statement about some of these concerns.

13. (C) ...WHO PUSHES BACK: Gevorkian and Sargsian argued back -- while hardly allowing CDA to get a word in, over the course of a 90 minute meeting -- with a wide-ranging rebuttal of why the issues mentioned were simply misunderstood or deliberately distorted by the opposition or its sympathizers to cast a shadow over the election. They agreed that no one should be compelled to campaign for anyone, but denied that was happening, saying that it was only natural that public sector workers (whose salaries have shot upward) would be enthusiastic about the PM's campaign and want to get involved. They questioned why it was inappropriate for regional governors and mayors to be active campaign participants. Did not U.S. state governors endorse and campaign for candidates? We agreed, but retorted that the context is crucial, and there must be no hint of coercion and

no use of the administrative structures of the government to pass down campaign instructions. The two advisers insisted that was not going on. They went on to say that regional governors are political figures in their own right and the nature of their government work is not confined to a regular work day, but from morning to night, including weekends. It was impossible to make a clean separation between their official work day and their private time, unlike more junior state workers. Finally, they asked for specific cases so that they could investigate. We are providing several specific cases that we have permission to share, involving Dashnak party members in Shirak region who say they were fired from public schools or clinics for refusing to support the PM's candidacy.

14. (C) KOCHARIAN BLASTS BACK SHARPLY: FM Oskanian called in CDA February 7 for a meeting, at which it became apparent that the purpose was to enable presidency staffer Vigen Sargsian to deliver a strong message from the president. Oskanian opened by asking about the issues, to which he responded with his own general apologia about Armenian political culture and relative unsophistication about election matters. While acknowledging problems, he suggested that most of our concerns were exaggerated. He said that taking passport data from voters seemed inappropriate, but that most of the other points we raised were simply misunderstandings. Oskanian then turned the meeting over to Sargsian, who delivered a very tough message on behalf of the president. Kocharian considered it now to be a very sensitive time in Armenia, in the immediate prelude to elections. He would interpret any public statement -- aside from a generic expression of U.S.-Armenian cooperation on elections -- as an "unacceptable interference in domestic politics inappropriate to diplomatic status," and would react strongly against it. Sargsian conveyed Kocharian's

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observation that he has little time left in his term, and thus little to lose if circumstances put him in confrontation with the United States government. COMMENT: We have debated at post whether the president was specifically threatening to declare CDA persona non grata, or some lesser unspecified retaliation. In any event, the language left little room for doubt that the president would act. END COMMENT. Kocharian's message was softened slightly by expressing gratitude for the ongoing frank exchange between the embassy and GOAM on election-related issues, and his hope that all problems would be resolved through that channel. Sargsian also provided the information that all of the regional governors would take a campaign leave of absence by February 10, while a few had been on leave since February 1. CDA made no commitments about our future steps, but said we would take the president's views into consideration, that we appreciated the government's readiness to look seriously at the issues we had raised, and would welcome strong statements from the president and other top officials emphasizing that such abuses were unacceptable. He reiterated that our goal is to help Armenian to have strong, clean elections that will convey full legitimacy on the next president.

15. (C) PITCHING TO THE CAMPAIGN MANAGER: We had earlier requested a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Territorial Administration Hovik Abrahamian -- who is now on leave as Sargsian's full-time campaign manager -- to make all the same points about the campaign's abuses. That meeting took place February 7. Abrahamian took in our points, said all the right things about how the things we raised were inappropriate, but insisted that no such things were going on. He said that with the PM's high poll numbers, they have nothing to gain from such tactics, and would be loathe to have any shadow cast over the election. He promised, however, to renew the message down through the party hierarchy about strictly observing the electoral code's prohibitions against misuse of state resources and staff for political campaigning.

¶16. (C) WHY TAKE PASSPORT DATA?: Our interlocutors all questioned the point of collecting passport data from voters -- as we ourselves had -- wondering what possible nefarious use could be made. Several pointed out that the government itself has full access to the passport database, and should it want this information, would be able to get it directly from there. (COMMENT: Tellingly, no one made even a pro forma suggestion that the ruling party's campaign staff actually should not/not have direct access to government databases of citizens' personal data. END COMMENT). The issue in fact seems to be purely psychological. The perception is that if a voter is persuaded or intimidated into giving his/her voting commitment and passport data to a Republican party representative, that makes the voter feel that the state will somehow keep close watch on them to verify the fulfillment of the commitment. There is presumably no real mechanism for anyone to really find out how someone has voted, but given Armenia's authoritarian Soviet past, the belief is that many less-sophisticated voters will believe that the regime with its intelligence resources will indeed be able to find out how the individual voted and retaliate.

¶17. (C) SOME ACTION TAKEN: At the government's regular weekly cabinet meeting February 7, Prime Minister Sargsian made a statement reminding all ministries about the law's requirements for scrupulous separation between public and campaign business, and this fact was publicized in a government press release. The Central Election Commission chairman made a statement emphasizing that voters should not reveal their passport data to anyone other than election commission members or accredited party proxies (observers). (NOTE: The Election Code required voters to show their passports to election commission (precinct) officials and party proxies in the course of their duties. END NOTE) Presidential staffer Vigen Sargsian also said that the President would be willing to make such a statement in the upcoming days.

¶18. (C) CONFERRING WITH THE EUROS AND ODIHR: We have scheduled a meeting here in the embassy for February 8 with the chiefs of mission of the British, French, German, Polish, and European Commission missions in Yerevan, to compare notes about the pre-election campaign and what, if any, further action should be considered, perhaps collectively. Polchief has also shared our concerns about the process with his counterpart in the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission, who said she has received many similar reports, and even a few pieces of concrete evidence.

¶17. (C) COMMENT: Abrahamian is an oily, machine politician,

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whose cabinet job amounts to patronage-dispenser in chief as well as chief enforcer of Yerevan's policy on the regional and local governments. We believe him to be at the center of a purposeful effort to abuse agencies and offices of local government to arm-twist every vote he possibly can for the prime minister. We therefore have little hope for him personally as a source of remediation, but we felt it important to put all the relevant officials on notice that we have become aware of the problems and consider it unacceptable. Having registered our concerns, we will wait and watch until early next week, to see what next move may be appropriate.

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